

A tale of two Bens: venal and vain meet their match

Everybody knows that Ben Affleck's movie won the Oscar for Best Picture, just like everybody knows that Benedict XVI is no longer Pope. February is the shortest month, but it's still long enough for some big, unexpected events to happen.

Okay, maybe some of you were expecting *Argo* to win. But were you expecting Michelle Obama to insert Washington, DC, into Hollywood showbiz at the big moment? Appearing from the White House via video link, the U.S. government is apparently not happy with taking over



Global Theatre
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one-sixth of the American economy. Health care is not enough; it wants showbiz in its clutches too.

Now, I don't think Washington wants direct control of filmmaking. And Hollywood wouldn't let that happen either, since it knows Washington best serves Hollywood's interests indirectly. Look at all the great material it gets from American foreign policy screw-ups.

Yes, the mess in Iran

gave Ben Affleck a great story to tell. No doubt Obama's current incompetence, which threatens to eclipse Jimmy Carter's on the Iran file, is setting the storytelling stage for future Oscar opportunities.

The global theatre is full of the venal and vain. That's why we'll always root for a story where the underdog can turn venality and vanity on its head, to score a win for the good guys.

In case you missed it: a lot of the venality and vanity mocked in *Argo* involved the Hollywood showbiz world. And the good guys? Ben Affleck



Warner Bros. / CNS, Paul Haring / CNS

Ben Affleck stars in a scene from the movie *Argo*. Pope Benedict XVI reads his address as he leads his final general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican. Morrissey writes that "Hollywood's idea of humility stands in contrast" to that of Pope Benedict's.

spelled it out in his acceptance speech: "I want to thank Canada."

That kind of love is what the venal and the vain

in Washington are craving. They want the thanks, the adulation, the glory, the recognition – which is what the Oscars are really all about. No, power and control are not enough, either in Washington or Hollywood. Above all, the royalty in both towns craves to be loved.

Sure, sometimes the thanks can be sincere, as in those rare and unexpected acceptance speech moments, where we can spot genuine humanity. But most of the time, the parade of adulation is like the red carpet ritual.

That ritual is a paradoxical display. On the one hand, the star wants to be like an unchallenged god, exalted on high and admired from afar. On the other hand, the star must ritually preempt the resentments of everyone who is being outshined. Hence we witness the actors playing their greatest role: themselves, thanking everybody else and pretending to be no better than them.

But of course Hollywood humility is obviously make-believe. The crowd that you need to give you awards and applause is the same crowd that could turn on you and murder your career in an instant.

The red on the carpet is thus richly symbolic for the movie stars. It symbolizes not just the career deaths of those whom they have vanquished to get where they are today. It also symbolizes the same dire fate that awaits the stars, if they don't play along by ritually sacrificing their egos onstage in

front of everyone else as they win.

This fascinating Oscar display of Hollywood's idea of humility stands in contrast with the sudden twist ending to Pope Benedict's papacy.

I don't think you'll ever see a Pope on video link from the Vatican to announce who won Best Picture. And I don't think you'll ever see a President resign, or an Oscar winner give back their award, in order to devote themselves instead to prayer and meditation.

Benedict thus provides the world with an example of what the papacy should be: entirely freed from the worldly logic of power, control, fame, and adulation.

In this modern media age, the Pope has sensed that technology turns every Pope into a celebrity. Whether he likes it or not, the new media make the Pope into a target on the red carpet, like they do for all the rest of the world-famous.

But the Church's mission is not to generate rivals or to play worldly games of power and adulation. The measure of a Pope is not the number of his Twitter followers or likes on Facebook.

On Ash Wednesday, in his final homily, the Pope spoke instead of that to which we should all aspire: "overcoming individualism and rivalry is a humble and precious sign."

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